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CIVIL SOCIETY IN POST-EUROMAIDAN UKRAINE

From Revolution to Consolidation

With a foreword by Richard Youngs

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Foreword

Richard Youngs

In recent years, civil society around the world has undergone important changes. Innovative forms of activism are emerging and mass protests have occurred in a large number of countries in every region of the world. While much of this surge in activism is based around familiar forms of political contestation and formal NGOs, at least some of it appears to be qualitatively different and even experimental. These developments have prompted a series of academic and policy debates about how significant the changes to global civil society really are; about what is driving the emergence of a transformed activism; and whether the changes are an advance or setback for democratic politics.

Natalia Shapovalova and Olga Burlyuk have compiled a volume that contributes enormously to these debates. There is a clear need for in-depth case studies and this volume delivers quality chapters that address the many different dimensions of the civic activism that has taken shape in Ukraine since the 2014 Euromaidan revolt. The book represents a major addition to work on Ukraine itself, as it represents the first comprehensive assessment of post-Euromaidan civil society – and the conclusions the chapters generate will be of intense value and interest to those studying and engaged in the country’s still-fluctuating reform process. But the volume will have a wider appeal and relevance too, to the extent that it speaks to the more general debates about the ongoing evolution of civil society’s very nature and essence across the globe.

Indeed, the volume shows that Ukraine is an especially evocative and significant case for these debates. The country has witnessed the growth of an extremely vibrant civil society that, as the following chapters show, has had real impact. It is a country where civic activism intersects deeply with geopolitics, with the book highlighting the role of conflict in the east of Ukraine in propelling new forms of activism organized around issues related to the

armed conflict. It is also an example of civic activists transitioning into politics often with considerable success—questioning the critical view that today’s civic activism is reflexively anti-politics and invariably unable or unwilling to advance constructively “from protest to politics”.

The book makes clear in addition that the emerging civic activism can take on a variety of forms, not all of which are positive for democracy or liberal values. In Ukraine, religious, conservative-nationalist and liberal-rights groups have all become more prominent and active in recent years, highlighting that the new activism is far from representing any single uniform vision of politics or the nation. Some of this civic activism is very local, while some has been spurred by links to the extensive Ukrainian diaspora. Some is funded through small-scale local contributions, while some is still heavily dependent on external funding. Many of the micro-level grassroots initiatives that appeared in 2014 have not survived, while other actors that have regained prominence are the large, formal NGOs that have been active for many years. New and old civic activism exist in a complex relationship with each other.

Ukraine’s post-Euromaidan civic vibrancy has in some ways contributed to partial democratization and spurred a strengthening of state capacities. Yet, in other ways it risks undercutting state-building, or at least easing the pressure on government to accelerate effective reforms. Some emerging Ukrainian activism is supplementary service provision that is relieving the pressure on the state, while some is a critical contestation that has increasingly raised the danger of reforms stalling and authoritarian dynamics once again gaining ground. The book also shows that Ukraine is a case where restrictions to civic space are appearing, even in what has become a relatively open political space and under a government nominally committed to democratic reform; Ukraine shows that these kinds of attacks on civil society are by no means limited to the world’s most autocratic states. Overall, Ukraine’s unique situation of partial democratization combined with internal military conflict and still-contested statehood-sovereignty has been both a cause of new civic vibrancy and a limitation to this.

The following chapters combine analytical depth and clear policy relevance. The volume benefits from a team made up of academic scholars, policy analysts and those practically involved in activism. Indeed, several of the authors have experience both as scholars and activists, aptly personifying the very points made in the volume about the new fluidity of Ukraine's civic sphere. As most of the chapters are written by Ukrainians, readers will gain a nuanced and detailed feel for the current on-the-ground developments within the country, while the contributions from EU-based writers help place Ukraine in a more comparative context. It can only be hoped that the volume will encourage similar endeavors to dissect the changing face of civic activism in other countries undergoing equally significant change.